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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MOSCOW 002843

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/16/2018  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [NATO](#) [GG](#) [UP](#) [XH](#) [RS](#)  
SUBJECT: RUSSIA FIGHTS BACK AGAINST ISOLATION

REF: A. MOSCOW 2787  
[1](#)B. MOSCOW 2789  
[1](#)C. MOSCOW 2814  
[1](#)D. MOSCOW 1904  
[1](#)E. MOSCOW 2804

Classified By: Ambassador John R. Beyrle for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. While reactions to the Secretary's September 18 speech have been fairly muted, with the exception of the customary harangue from the MFA, the Russian leadership is at pains to show that Russia is not isolated following the events in Georgia. Moscow is seeking to push back on claims that its actions risk making it irrelevant by classic wedge-driving, reaching out to Europe and arguing that "a new world balance" is needed. The GOR's insistence that it wants to work with the U.S. on key challenges is targeted at the Europeans, with most experts seeing the underlying message as "don't touch Ukraine, which is in Russia's sphere of interest." While the news focus on Georgia here has been overshadowed by Russia's financial crisis, Moscow continues to argue for Medvedev's proposal for a new European security architecture as a way to counter U.S. "unipolarism," and to restore investment confidence. We should continue to ensure that there is no daylight between us and our allies. End summary.

Reaction Muted  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) Initial media reaction to the Secretary's September 18 speech was fairly muted (possibly due to focus on the financial crisis), with some outlets highlighting the Secretary's comments that Russia would become increasingly isolated and irrelevant, while others noted U.S. acknowledgment of Georgia's initial attacks and the killing of Russian peacekeepers. In a speech to representatives of public organizations September 19, Medvedev said Russia's priorities were unchanged by the events in Georgia and Russia would not allow pressure from outside to affect its course. He reiterated his call for a "pan-European security treaty" and blamed NATO for provoking the conflict in Georgia. He rejected those who, he said, were pushing Russia toward "an autonomous development behind...an iron curtain," saying Russia was not interested in returning to the past. Citing the financial crisis, he noted that the world was "open and global, politically and economically." He questioned American support for Russian judges, saying if the U.S. was referring to joint programs, such programs "were usually carried out with countries that share a similar vision of the main processes underway in the world." He ended, saying Russia wanted others to listen to its arguments and to understand the difficult choice it made, and would continue to work on this "regardless of the various foolish words we hear from different quarters."

[1](#)3. (SBU) The MFA, typically, posted a sharp response, saying this was not the first time the events in Georgia had been "grossly distorted" by U.S. officials, and the speech was not

"surprising in view of Washington's commitment to support the bankrupt regime in Tbilisi." It commented that Russian-American relations were at a turning point, but said Russia would not become involved in a confrontation, but would "lobby for a positive, unifying agenda...."

#### Russian Diplomatic Offensive

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¶4. (C) In the past couple of weeks, Russian leaders have engaged in a flurry of diplomatic and public relations activity aimed at conveying the message that, contrary to the U.S.'s claims, Russia is not isolated, and that things are getting "back to normal" with the international community. In Lavrov's trips to Poland (ref A) and Ireland, DPM Sechin's trip to Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela (ref B), DFMs Saltanov's and Titov's visits to the Middle East and Central Europe respectively, and visits to Russia by the Azerbaijani (ref C) and Vietnamese Presidents, and French Prime Minister, the Russian leadership has sought to show that Russia is going about its diplomatic business as usual. They have endeavored to explain their actions in Georgia, while seeking to play up economic and energy prospects and cooperation, in an effort to restore investor confidence. The tone has mostly been positive and friendly (witness Lavrov's unexpectedly upbeat and conciliatory message in Warsaw, ref A).

¶5. (C) Similarly, albeit in a harsher voice, the leadership has reached out to the European press with Putin's September 13 interview in France's Le Figaro and Lavrov's September 15 letter to Germany's Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. These

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efforts have been aimed at persuading a European audience that Russia's actions were justified and that although Russia wanted to continue its cooperation with the U.S., the U.S. is to blame for "spoiling the relationship" (as claimed by Putin in his interview).

#### "Russia is not Irrelevant"

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¶6. (SBU) The Russian leadership is also pressing its argument that Georgia highlighted the need for a "multilateral world."

In almost all his public remarks, including in response to the Secretary's speech and to the Valdai Club in early September, Medvedev has said that existing security structures were "defunct" and has reiterated his call for a new European security architecture. In a September 15 article entitled "The World in Search of a New Balance," Lavrov argued it was possible to build a "positive agenda" with the U.S., but America should "recognize the reality of the post-American world and begin adapting to it." He said Russia would conduct business with "any America," and would continue to speak with Washington while there was "the slightest hope to understand each other and reach agreement," but only on the basis of "strict reciprocity and honesty." Russia would not allow itself to become involved in any confrontations, but, Lavrov cautioned, Russia would operate independently if necessary to protect its national interests.

#### "The Target is Europe..."

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¶7. (C) Experts agree that the Russian leadership's target is Europe. Ekho Moskv Editor-in-Chief Aleksey Venediktov (protect) told us Putin and Medvedev truly believed that the U.S. was behind the Georgian decision to attack Tskhinvali and were heavily influenced by the "red folders" prepared by the security services alleging U.S. complicity in everything from fighting Russian forces to re-arming Georgia with offensive weapons. Moscow had interpreted the removal of the 123 agreement from the legislative agenda as a "sanction," according to Venediktov's read-out of his meeting with DFM Ryabkov, and Ryabkov told him Russia would thwart

the U.S. on additional sanctions against Iran in response. With a renewed emphasis on creating a new European security architecture, Russia was looking at the Kazakh chairmanship of the OSCE as an opportunity to move towards a "Helsinki 2."

While conservative talk show host Aleksey Pushkov maintained that there was "no passion in this hate affair" with the U.S., he stressed that Moscow was focused on a battle for Europe, with the Russian leadership eager to underscore that Saakashvili precipitated the conflict, leaving Russia no choice but to strike back. Pushkov emphasized that there was little criticism of Europe presented by the leadership during the Valdai discussion group.

...but Stay Away from Ukraine"

18. (C) The underlying message, our contacts say, is that Russia will act when its core interests are threatened, and Ukraine is the center. On September 20, Lavrov lashed out again at Ukraine, saying Ukrainian membership in NATO would "produce a great crisis and impact European security "in the most negative way." Referring to Putin's 2007 speech in Munich, Aleksandr Belkin of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy told us: "Munich was the turning point" where Russia was saying "no more; you must listen to us." Masha Lipman of the Carnegie Moscow Center agreed, adding that Munich was the message, while Georgia put the words into action. Pushkov suggested that Georgia had overtaken the foreign policy concept authored by Medvedev at the outset of his administration, which he dismissed as being too focused on consensual relations in foreign affairs. Instead, "the rules will be written to reflect the fact that Russia is ready for combat" when its core interests are challenged. The expansion of NATO to Russian borders could not be interpreted by the Russian leadership as anything other than a "brazen assault" on Russian influence in its neighborhood, he argued. Aleksandr Golts of the Daily Journal warned that if the West continued to press NATO membership for Ukraine, "the level of rage will be unbelievable." Moscow, he cautioned, would do everything it could to split Ukraine into two or three parts, and after events in Georgia, the international community needed to take Moscow's threats seriously.

Comment

19. (C) The Europeans appear to the Russians to be predictably split on the degree to which they are willing to isolate or

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curtail cooperation with Russia, and Russia can be expected to continue to seek ways to get back to "business as usual" with them. Moscow believes that there are few consequences that the U.S. or West can impose that will seriously hurt the country, although the financial crisis (which Medvedev acknowledged last week was partially due to the war in Georgia) has shaken the leadership (ref E) and increased its need to seek ways to restore investor confidence, not just in Russia's economy but in its political environment as well. We can expect Russia to continue to reach out to the international community, possibly with concessions (such as offers to buy Azeri gas at Western prices, or increased economic and energy cooperation with Latin America) to prevent becoming "isolated and irrelevant." At the same time, Moscow will continue to send a strong message on NATO membership for Ukraine, and to drive wedges as much as possible between the U.S. and our allies. We should continue to do everything possible to frustrate that agenda.

BEYRLE